

Statement of Congressman Xavier Becerra

on H.R. 2134

**A Bill to Establish a Commission to Study the Potential Creation of a
National Museum of the American Latino Community**

**House Resources Subcommittee on National Parks
1334 Longworth HOB
March 30, 2006**

Chairman Pearce, Ranking Member Christensen, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing on H.R. 2134, a bill to establish a Commission to develop a plan of action for potential establishment and maintenance of a National Museum of the American Latino. I introduced this legislation with my good friend and colleague Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. This bill represents a first, small step toward exploring the feasibility of moving forward with an idea that has long fueled the beliefs and aspirations of millions of Americans.

The bipartisan Commission created by this bill (“Commission”) would be charged with examining and reporting to Congress and the President their recommendations on whether and how to establish a new museum dedicated to the art, history, and culture of the American Latino population of the United States. The Commission would be comprised of experts from the national art and museum communities as well as individuals with experience in administration and development of cultural institutions. Commissioners would be appointed in a bipartisan manner by the President and the leaders of the House and Senate.

Along with the question of whether a new museum is warranted, the Commission would examine such issues as the capacity for fundraising a new museum, the availability of a collection to exhibit, whether a new museum should be part of the Smithsonian Institution or independent, and where a museum might be located in Washington, D.C. or its environs. Congress then may choose whether to act on the recommendations as it sees fit.

To put a finer point on one of the questions the Commission will consider, I would emphasize that there is likely not much need for the Commission to look beyond the items in the Smithsonian's collections that are currently in storage to find artifacts suitable for display in an American Latino museum. Since its founding 150 years ago, the Smithsonian has led many Latin American expeditions and has collected materials from all branches of science, including more than five thousand artifacts. Only 5 percent of the Smithsonian's collection is on display at any point. If one took the time to look at every individual item on display in the Smithsonian's museums for a few seconds, it would take several years. If the entire collection were displayed, it would probably take one several lifetimes.

H.R. 2134 is modeled after legislation sponsored by Congressman John Lewis of Georgia in the 107th Congress that established a similar commission whose work culminated in the plan for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

I congratulate my friend and colleague, Congressman Lewis, the members of this Committee and all who worked so hard to bring the National Museum of African American History and Culture to fruition.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSEUMS IN THE CAPITAL

Five years ago, the National Capital Planning Commission gave expression to the primary function of the cultural and historical exhibitions on the National Mall in their Master Plan for Memorials and Museums. It said

The memorials and museums that define Washington's Monumental Core express America's connections to its past and its direction for the future.... [T]hese cultural and commemorative public spaces are physical reminders of our collective past and repositories for our most precious artifacts; they help us understand what it means to be an American.

(National Capital Planning Commission Memorials and Museums Master Plan, 2001; emphasis added).

We are yet a young nation when compared to the rest of the world, and our collective past and history is continuously being written. As Americans, we all hold dear certain principles, such as liberty, democracy, and justice, and I am confident that these principles will also be embraced by forthcoming generations if we fulfill our responsibility to them.

Our national museums are educational institutions, as well as premiere research facilities and art collections. They have great influence over what Americans know and believe about our history and cultural life. When the children of America visit Washington to

learn what our museums have to teach them, they go home believing that they have an understanding about what it means to be an American. Still, you and I know there is so much more to teach.

AMERICAN LATINOS

There are 44 million American Latinos in the United States and Puerto Rico. While 60 percent are native-born Americans, American Latinos also share a heritage drawn from a combination of old world and “new world” cultures. Among America’s ethnic groups, Americans of Latino heritage are unique in the fact that you can find mixed strains of cultural influence from Europe, Africa, and the pre-Colombian Americas. The mixture of cultures makes many American Latinos more open to change, to adoption of new norms and customs, to add new flavors to the recipes we cook, and to accept differences in others. In a word, American Latinos reflect what it means to be an American, a citizen of a nation that welcomes and embraces diversity.

Americans of Latino heritage are a very youthful population – more so than the rest of the nation – and are thus projected to play an increasing role in the nation’s economy, workforce, and electorate. Almost half of American Latinos are under the age of 25. American Latinos have a higher proportion of preschool aged children among their population than any other group. Similarly, 11 percent of the Latino population is under the age of five. Among our nation’s school-age population, about every fifth student is Latino. In fact, the Census Bureau tells us that every fifth child born today in the United States is an American of Latino heritage. In contrast, only one in 20 American Latinos is

over age 65, while people over-65 make up 13 percent of the total population. The reality is that over time American Latinos will play an increasing role in the whole life of our society.

Americans of Latino heritage have been part of American history since before the founding of the United States. They were present on the American continent for more than two centuries prior to the Declaration of Independence. Spanish colonists founded the first permanent settlement in the territorial United States in St. Augustine, Florida in 1565, four decades before Jamestown and Plymouth Rock. The first church in North America was constructed by the Spanish in 1598 at San Juan Pueblo, 30 miles north of Santa Fe. One of the sixteen windows in the Colorado State Capitol depicts Casimiro Barela, a Hispano and former Governor and member of the state senate from 1876 to 1914, who was instrumental in the state's decision to publish all laws in English, German and Spanish.

During the American Revolutionary War, General Washington's army was successful at Yorktown in part because of support from a multi-ethnic army led by Spanish General Bernardo de Galvez on a southern front against the British, driving them out of the Gulf of Mexico, fighting them on the Mississippi and in Florida. The town of Galveston, Texas is named for him.

In every subsequent military conflict, American Latino soldiers fought along side their American brethren. One of the first U.S. soldiers to die in Iraq, Jose Gutierrez, was an

orphaned Guatemalan who at the time of his death was not even an American citizen.

American Latino participation in our armed forces is not a new phenomenon. More than 10,000 Americans of Latino heritage fought for both the North and the South during the civil war. It has been estimated that anywhere from 250,000 to 500,000 American Latinos served in the armed forces during World War II. Over 53,000 Puerto Ricans served in World War II during the period 1940-1946.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, while American Latinos make up 9.5 percent of the actively enlisted forces, they are over-represented in the categories that get the most dangerous assignments – infantry, gun crews and seamanship – and make up over 17.5 percent of the front lines. For this reason, in fact, as a proportion of their total numbers, American Latinos have earned more Congressional Medals of Honor than any other ethnic group.

The first American of Latino heritage elected to the House of Representatives was Californian Romualdo Pacheco, who won his election in 1876 by a margin of one vote. His opponent contested the election, but Pacheco was seated two years later after gaining the support of the Republican leader, James A. Garfield. Notwithstanding the Leader's backing, the House Committee on Elections overturned Pacheco's election and seated his opponent. Yet Pacheco was re-elected in 1879, and served for four more years. Last year, the House honored this pioneer with a portrait that hangs today in the nation's Capitol.

I am happy to say that the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress, elected some 90 years later, did not have as much difficulty being seated in her rightful place in the House of Representatives. I am referring, of course, to my friend and colleague Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, lead cosponsor of this legislation, whose groundbreaking achievements – as a woman, as a Latina, a Cuban refugee, as an American – should also be recognized as an important part of our nation’s history.

The richness of American culture has benefited greatly from contributions made by the American Latino community. New Orleans jazz legend Jelly Roll Morton said that our quintessential American music, jazz, was born with a “Spanish tinge.”

The civil rights era was a time in which American Latinos also made contributions. Before Brown v. Board of Education, California schools were desegregated by Mendez v. Westminster School District, a federal lawsuit brought by the parents of Mexican American students.

In economic terms, American Latinos are investing their sweat and hard-earned money in the American economy. American Latino purchasing power nationally will top \$1.08 trillion by 2010, up 413 percent from \$212 billion in 1990¹ – a percentage gain that is far greater than the 177 percent increase in the buying power of all U.S. consumers in the same period.

¹ Jeffrey Humphreys, “The Multicultural Economy 2005: America’s Minority Buying Power.” Selig Center for Economic Growth, University of Georgia. 2005.

Americans of Latino heritage are also investing in the American Dream. Between 1997 and 2002 the number of Latino owned businesses grew by 31 percent, three times the national average.² Latino businesses, numbering 1.6 million, generated \$222 billion in revenue in 2002, an increase of 19 percent since 1997.³ South Carolina had one the fastest rates of growth for Latino-owned firms between 1997 and 2002 at 48 percent.⁴ In New Mexico, there are close to 30,000 Latino owned firms with sales and receipts totaling over \$4.5 billion.⁵ The IRS predicts that 1 out of every 10 small businesses will be Latino-owned by the year 2007.

The commitment of Americans of Latino descent to the United States is obvious. Yet many people lack knowledge of this history and of Latino contributions to American society. Americans of Latino heritage are often viewed as an immigrant population, with a culture that is alien to the American way of life. The truth is that 60 percent of Latinos are native-born.

OUR NATIONAL MUSEUMS

For many years, many Americans – of Latino heritage and otherwise – believed that the mosaic of America portrayed in Washington’s museums was missing a few tiles. In response, during the 1990s, the Smithsonian examined itself and determined in its own studies that the mirror it was holding up to America was indeed incomplete. In 1997, the Center on Latino Initiatives was launched in part as an effort to respond to studies on the

² Mike Bergman, “Growth of Hispanic-Owned Businesses Triples the National Average,” Public Information Office, U.S. Bureau of the Census, March 21, 2006, 1.

³ Bergman, 1.

⁴ Bergman, 2.

⁵ Bergman, 2.

lack of representation of American Latinos at the Smithsonian in terms of staffing and exhibitions.

For the past ten years, with a budget of only one million dollars per year, the Center has promoted a more Latino-inclusive program through the entire Smithsonian. The Center has made the museum community in Washington a little more reflective of the entire American population and has been at the core of the organization of several important national traveling exhibitions.

The success of the Center is evidence that there is a need and a constituency for more Latino-inclusive exhibits in the nation's capital. Yet the Center's success will continue to depend on the willingness and openness of the other institutions in Washington to add Latino-inclusive exhibitions to their established agendas. Having a permanent seat at the table would ensure that the world's largest museum complex and our nation's premier cultural institutions are as truly reflective of the nation's people and achievements as they should be.

The Commission proposed by the legislation would determine how to best reflect culture and historical contributions of the diverse community of 44 million Americans of Latino heritage living in the United States and Puerto Rico. I am not a museum expert, nor an art historian, but there are plenty of talented people in the community that could think seriously about what it would take to begin this project.

The capital city of Washington was visited by nearly 19 million individuals in 2004 – one million of these came from outside of the United States. It is the 4th most visited destination for U.S. travelers. One in four of these tourists visited a cultural site, a museum or historical place. Over 35 million individuals attend the Smithsonian's museums and traveling exhibits every year. Ninety percent of these visitors are from the United States. As you can imagine, many are children visiting with their parents or on school trips.

Many of these children will visit the nation's capital and will take the lessons learned here back home to their communities. When we visit the nation's capital we should leave inspired by our past with faith in our future. This country has always managed to give the next generation of leaders good reason to be proud of our history and culture. H.R. 2134 would bring light to the issue of whether our national museums are doing all they can to provide the next generations of Americans, which will be increasingly of Latino heritage, the best picture of what it means to be an American, embracing our ideals of democracy and pluralism.

CONCLUSION

Given the compelling demographic changes, and the increasing integration of the American Latino population in the cultural, economic, and political life of this nation, we have a responsibility to ensure that our national museums reflect this reality. Whether the these questions are answered in the form of a new museum, or in a renewed commitment

by our national museums to reflect our increasing diversity, is ultimately up to Congress. The intent of H.R. 2134 is to have an expert Commission help us consider these issues.

Passage of this bill would be just the first step toward making sure America's cultural institutions provide giving America and its entire people a better chance to fully experience what it means to be an American.

Once again, thank you Mr. Chairman, Congresswoman Christensen, and the members of the subcommittee for considering this bill today. I look forward to working with you toward its passage.